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THOREAU AS ARTIST

I.

Inveterate observer and recorder that he was, at heart Thoreau was assuredly not a naturalist, but rather—what? A literary artist? This answer, one of the commonest, has behind it not only the authority of his friend Channing, who said that Thoreau regarded literature as his profession, but also that of Thoreau himself, who declared, in unmistakable terms: “My work is writing”. Yet it must be remembered that in his lifetime he published only two books, the *Week* and *Walden*; that the creative impulse in him was neither vehement nor persistent, most of his *Journal* being a bare record of facts; and that he wanted both the spur of fame and the desire to serve men, at least as these aims are usually conceived by writers. If writing was his work, it was his work in much the same sense in which surveying and pencil-making were his work: he was not a surveyor or manufacturer of pencils, nor was he a man of letters.

Poet, at all events, he was not, for a man can scarcely be a poet without achieving a certain bulk of successful verse, and the total bulk of Thoreau's verse, most of it unsuccessful, would fill less than an ordinary volume. That he wrote it at all is to be explained less in terms of his artistic powers, since he lived in a time of renaissance when the homespun of prose was disparaged in favor of purple singing-robcs, in a time when, it has been said, one could not throw a stone in the city of Boston without hitting a poet. So Thoreau versified; his prose works abound in interjected poems or poetic fragments, many of which have the odd effect of serving, not to lift the reader aloft on the wings of sudden inspiration, but to make him halt in consternation before a veritable New England glacial boulder, shapeless and inert. There is little in him of the lyrical poet's instinct to burst into song at every provocation of nature. Although he tells us repeatedly that he is inspired, he also tells us that the mood is gone before he can versify it; the best poetry, he says broadly, is never expressed—an assertion not without its measure of truth. Indeed, it was fatally true of his own

practice. Delicately perceptive of the concrete world, eagerly responsive to beauty, inwardly living the life of the poet, he was so intent on understanding and appropriating his visions that when the time came for singing them he was dumb.

THE POET'S DELAY

In vain I see the morning rise,
In vain observe the western blaze,
Who idly look to other skies,
Expecting life by other ways.

Shall I then wait the autumn wind,
Compelled to seek a milder day,
And leave no curious nest behind,
No woods still echoing to my lay?

In these lines is something of his Puritanical distrust of all art; "very dangerous", he says elsewhere, is the talent for composition, since "I feel as if my life had grown more outward when I can express it". With him it is always *my life*, never the glory of divine poetry:—

"My life hath been the poem I would have writ,
But I could not both live and live to utter it."

In natural metrical skill he was more deficient even than Emerson. Most of his verses are benumbed, and crawl along, with an occasional spurt, like a grasshopper in the autumn. For example:—

"Let such pure hate still underprop
Our love, that we may be
Each other's conscience,
And have our sympathy
Mainly from thence."

If Donne deserved hanging for not keeping of accent, what of Thoreau? The following is a more just specimen, typical in subject, form, and mood:—

TALL AMBROSIA

Among the signs of autumn I perceive
The Roman wormwood (called of learnèd men
Ambrosia elatior, food for gods,
For by impartial science the humblest weed
Is as well named as is the proudest flower)
Sprinkles its yellow dust over my shoes

As I brush through the now neglected garden.
 We trample under foot the food of gods
 And spill their nectar in each drop of dew.
 My honest shoes, fast friends that never stray
 Far from my couch, thus powdered, countrified,
 Bearing many a mile the marks of their adventure,
 At the post-house disgrace the Gallic gloss
 Of those well-dressed ones who no morning dew
 Nor Roman wormwood ever have done through,
 Who never walk, but are transported rather,
 For what old crime of theirs I do not gather.

In such lines he is a forerunner of Robert Frost; if Emerson's judgment is right, he could also be a successor and improver of Simonides, as in the best of all his poems, the *Walden* verses on "Smoke":—

"Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird,
 Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight;
 Lark without song, and messenger of dawn,
 Circling above the hamlets as thy nest;
 Or else, departing dream and shadowy form
 Of midnight vision, gathering up thy skirts;
 By night star-veiling, and by day
 Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;—
 Go thou, my incense, upward from this hearth,
 And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame."

Virtually blank verse, this delicate yet classically firm little poem suggests the possibilities of that form for lyrical use. Had Thoreau lived in the England of Elizabeth, he might well have been a builder of lofty rhyme; like Whitman, although for other reasons, he was a great poet *in posse*.

His poetic feeling, however, is worthily embalmed in his prose. Moments of inspiration, as he remarks, are not lost merely because they fail to leave a deposit in verse; the impression abides, and in due time is expressed in a form equally genuine if less ardent: when time has emphasized the essential truth in these ecstatic states,—

"in cooler moments we can use them as paint to gild and adorn our prose. . . They are like a pot of pure ether. They lend the writer when the moment comes a certain superfluity of wealth, making his expression to overrun and float itself."

Without this superfluity of wealth, Thoreau's prose would be shorn of most of its beauty and power. If not a great poet, Thoreau is a great prose writer.

II

The first and last impression produced by Thoreau's prose is its sincerity, its unflinching truth. It is faithfully idiosyncratic, the mirror of his sincerity of character. "I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion"—who but Thoreau could have written that? Speaking of the art of writing, Thoreau leans upon that universally applicable maxim of the transcendentalists: "Be faithful to your genius!" This is for him the central precept.

"The one great rule of composition—and if I were a professor of rhetoric I should insist on this—is, to *speak the truth*. This first, this second, this third: pebbles in your mouth or not."

He was instinctively and somewhat bitterly suspicious of "the *belles-lettres* and the *beaux arts* and their *professors*, which we can do without". He would simply say, with Buonaparte: "Speak plain; the rest will follow", with his eye on the truth and not on the ornaments. He would not seek expressions, but thoughts to be expressed—and even this did not satisfy him, for best of all, he says somewhere, is "the theme that seeks me, not I it". He is only to report, to obey, to serve as agent, to lend himself to an utterance "free and lawless as a lamb's bleat": an account true enough of his habit if one bears in mind that he was a somewhat wolfish lamb bred in a highly civilized tradition. His distinction in this matter, however, is not in his theory of style, which is the common property of the romantic school, but in his practice, which is all but unequalled in its resoluteness. Cardinal Newman, despite his admirable statement of the two-fold aspect of style, of the marriage of thought and word, and his assertion that his own aim was to express truth with no admixture of rhetoric, clearly enough was enamored of Roman eloquence. Similarly, to take an instance from Thoreau's Rome, the youthful Emerson, relishing resounding phrases and noble

periods, never, in later years, quite freed himself from the seductions of adventitious beauty. The ideal of Emerson's style, says Mr. Brownell, is eloquence; that of Thoreau's, we may add in contrast, is truth. So rigorously does Thoreau follow his ideal that he demands of every sentence that it be "the result of a long probation", expressing in words what had already been expressed in action. He applies this ideal, not only to writing, but quite as much to reading. "What I began by reading," he says, "I must finish by acting." In a good book he looked first of all, perhaps, for the gadfly in it, and rejoiced in its sting, not unlike the Puritans of the old Concord who magnified their sins and lashed them with a grim joy. It may well be that the idiosyncratic quality of Thoreau's prose style springs more from the Puritan in him than from the romanticist, more from the voice of conscience than from the "lamb's bleat".

The charm of Thoreau's prose rests, then, on its complete sincerity, and his prose is to be enjoyed to the full only by readers who find his personality attractive. Yet it has definite qualities that win the approval of any discriminating reader. His sentences, for one thing, are alive. Living in his way, an intense life constantly alert to what was going on in his inner being and in nature, he could not well write a page devoid of life, like the flaccid writing of the ordinary journalist. A writer without a full experience, as he says, used "torpid words, wooden or lifeless words, such words as 'humanitary', which have a paralysis in their tails". His own diction is fresh, dewy, an early morning diction. It has the enormous advantage of unusual concreteness—to be expected of a writer whose perceptions were so highly trained, and whose aversion was metaphysics. And his store of concrete words and images he used with gusto, if not abandon, responding to his theme, seeking to penetrate, by sympathy, to its heart or essence, as in this perfect account of the nighthawk's antic swoop and boom:—

"The night-hawk circled overhead in the sunny afternoons—for I sometimes made a day of it—like a mote in the eye, or in heaven's eye, falling from time to time with a swoop and a sound as if the heavens were rent, torn at last to very rags and tatters, and yet a seamless cope remained."

That slight turn, "or in heaven's eye", with its unexpected shifting of the image, is typical of his restrained animation. Or take the following instance of his expressiveness, with its "puff-ball" figure drawn straight from nature, its fit phrasing, and its satiric *aplomb*:—

"On gala days the town fired its great guns, which echo like pop-guns in these woods, and some waifs of martial music occasionally penetrate thus far. To me, away there in my bean-field at the other end of the town, the big guns sounded as if a puff-ball had burst; and when there was a military turn-out of which I was ignorant, I have sometimes had a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon, as if some eruption would break out there soon. . . ."

Figures of speech abound in such passages, as in all his writing—his concreteness is largely a figurativeness. His acquaintance with nature is, of course, reflected in his metaphors and similes, as in that perfect comparison of the big guns with a puff-ball; or in his comparison of the weeping of Ossian's heroes with the perspiration of stone in the heat of summer; or in his comparison of the man of intellect with a barren, staminiferous flower, and of the poet with a fertile and perfect flower; or in that graphic comparison, mentioned by Channing, of the branches of Darby's oak with gray lightning stereotyped on the sky.

His love of paradox, his fondness for puns (in which he rivals his favorite poets of the great period of English literature), and the ever-present element of surprise in his style, are additional manifestations of his desire fully to rouse himself and his reader to the inner nature of his theme, whether it be night-hawks, or celebrations by the rude bridge that spanned the river, or the sense of time and space. A penetrating impression must be made, at all costs. He is never, or almost never, languid, but holds his stilus firmly, as in this sentence, which illustrates its own meaning:—

"A sentence should read as if the author, had he held a plow instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow deep and straight to the end."

Here the emphasis falls distinctly and precisely where it should fall; so does it, to take another example, in this:—

“When the wind blows, the fine snow comes filtering down through all the aisles of the wood in a golden cloud.”

A penetrating effect, again, is achieved by his conciseness. Writing of De Quincey, Thoreau remarks that a good style must have a strength in reserve, must be “concentrated and nutty”. His own style, especially in the satiric and critical passages, is compact and germinal, acridly nutty, like an acorn:—

“Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world.”

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.”

“It takes a man to make a room silent.”

“One man may well feel chagrined when he finds he can do nearly all he can conceive.”

“How can we expect a harvest of thought who have not had a seed-time of character?”

He would not spread himself thin, either in his life or in his writing. Everything must be deliberate and concentrated.

“The writer must direct his sentences as carefully and leisurely as the marksman his rifle, who shoots sitting and with a rest, with patent sights and conical balls beside.”

And indeed, as a stylist, Thoreau is something of a marksman; now his sentences crack close at hand, now they sound as from a remoter station, reverberating solemnly, as if nature had taken them unto herself and charged them with a meaning of her own.

Such command is invaluable in satire and wit. Humor, that “indispensable pledge of sanity”, he had, but a good-natured spontaneous wit, with a trace of sharpness, was more characteristic. Says Channing:—

“There was a lurking humor in almost all that he said,—a dry wit, often expressed. He used to laugh heartily and many times in all the intercourse I had, when anything in that direction was needed. . . . No one more quickly entertained the apprehension of a jest; and his replies often came with a startling promptness.”

Instances are everywhere, even in the sober *Journal*, as when he tells of a party, warm and noisy, where he suffered himself to be introduced to two young women, one of whom "was as lively and loquacious as a chickadee; had been accustomed to the society of watering-places, and therefore could get no refreshment out of such a dry fellow as I", while the other, said to be pretty, could not make herself heard, "there was such a clacking", and he sagely concludes that parties are social machinery designed for matrimonial connections, and prefers to eat crackers and cheese in the silent woods with old Joseph Hosmer. Or take the following reaction to the *ewig Weibliche*:—

"When you are once comfortably seated at a public meeting, there is something unmanly in the sitting on tiptoe and *qui vive* attitude,—the involuntary rising into your throat, as if gravity had ceased to operate,—when a lady approaches, with quite godlike presumption, to elicit the miracle of a seat where none is."

Or finally this, in a milder vein, on a Puritan method of paying the clergy:—

"'In 1662, the town agreed that a part of every whale cast on shore be appropriated for the support of the ministry.' No doubt there seemed to be some propriety in thus leaving the support of the ministers to Providence, whose servants they are, and who alone rules the storms; for, when few whales were cast up, they might suspect that their worship was not acceptable. The ministers must have sat upon the cliffs in every storm, and watched the shore with anxiety."

Much of the charm of Thoreau's best pages resides in this lurking humor, this dry wit always ready to kindle. Without them, he might have been an intolerably disagreeable social critic, though he might still have written pleasantly of nature,—a possibility not so remote when we learn that in his last years he blotted the humorous parts of his essays, saying: "I cannot bear the levity I find". He spoke like Endicott at Merry Mount.

III

With Carlyle and Ruskin and other typical writers of his century, Thoreau obviously excelled in the expressive side of

art; but what of form? His sense of form has been placed with Emerson's (Emerson, to speak brusquely, having none). It is true that both Transcendentalists had the same weaknesses, even preparing their essays in the same manner by extorting them, so to say, out of their jewel-laden diaries. There is, however, a difference of degree. Thoreau's sentences and paragraphs cohere better than do Emerson's: he generally leaves the impression of continuity even when he lacks the reality, while Emerson often has the reality without leaving the impression. Thoreau, that is, writes from Parnassus, Emerson from Delphi. Thoreau, again, if less noble, is more luminous—not only because his subjects are different, but also because his mode of thinking is more concrete. Although wanting a true sense of the value of architectonics in literature, he loved shapeliness, fine carving, beauty of form, "elegance", as he termed it—the informing quality that is simply the flowering of a nature well-tempered and wisely civilized, a humane nature. Much of this love of beauty he must have derived from his intimate studies in Greek and Latin literatures. "I do not know," he remarks, "but the reason why I love some Latin verses more than whole English poems is simply in the elegant terseness and conciseness of the language." His feeling for beauty is thus not unlike that of the school of Pope and Dr. Johnson, although in saying this one should remember that he all but ignored the eighteenth century and differed far from Johnson in regarding *Lycidas* as perhaps the finest example of true elegance in English. In his own work he attained in large measure his ideal of elegance, partly through revision (a facile writer, he resorted constantly to the use of the file), and partly through his realizing in his character something of the classical decorum. He believed that beauty is the final excellence, that whereas a first inspection of good writing should reveal its common-sense, a second should reveal its severe truth, and a third beauty.

He was well fitted to see beauty in external nature. Coming back to nature from the ancient classics, he perceived with added force the meaning of the third of "those celestial thrins",—Truth, Goodness, Beauty,—in the loveliness of line, and light and shade, and color. Despite his provincial ignorance of the

plastic arts—an ignorance emulating Emerson's—he succeeded in some degree in acquiring the point of view of the plastic arts through training his eye for landscape. Again and again in his writings he dominates the natural scene, composing it with the craftsman's sense of design, displaying a feeling for balance, repetition, emphasis, harmony, quite apart from his feeling for spiritual significance lurking behind or expressed by outer beauty. He could enjoy beauty as such. His layman's interest in æsthetic principles is indicated by his careful reading of William Gilpin on landscape, and of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. When in the field he had a habit of now and then inclining his head to one side, or even stooping enough to reverse the picture completely, in order to refresh himself with the ideal beauty suggested by the scene when thus severed from its normal associations. It is noteworthy that when the woodsmen come to desecrate his Walden pine groves he does not tremble to the foundations, but calmly remarks: "It makes some new and unexpected prospects", and while these prospects are in the making quietly enjoys the picture before him: "A pretty forest scene, seeing oxen, so patient and stationary, good for pictures, standing on the ice,—a piece of still life." One of the wood-choppers "appeared to me apparently half a mile distant, as in a picture of which the two trees were the frame". After an extended description of this picture, he observes that some scenes have an obvious pictorial quality, needing no composition, no idealization, being already pictures, ready for the recording pencil.

Such pictures he was constantly watching for, training himself to recognize them when others would have passed them by. He would be an artist as well as a naturalist. Daily, while living in town, he took occasion to view the sunset, that ever-repeated yet never-repeated masterpiece of nature: "Every day a new picture is painted and framed, held up for half an hour, in such lights as the Great Artist chooses, and then withdrawn." Everywhere he looked for new 'effects' wrought by that Artist, the master *improvvisatore*, in the flowing world of nature. He never tired of seeing the familiar meadows, woods, ponds, and hills of Concord varied without repetition by his shifting points

of view and by the always unique caprices of the weather: he was as active in this æsthetic pursuit as in his scientific interest in names, dates, and temperatures. To-day he beholds Walden remote and eerie in the mist; to-morrow he shall thrill to the "clear, cold, Novemberish light" that glitters from downy twigs and lies vividly upon the "silver-plated river". He stands on Strawberry Hill late on a misty September afternoon: "Annursnack never looked so well as now seen from this hill. The ether gives a velvet softness to the whole landscape. The hills float in it. A blue veil is drawn over the earth." Thus day after day and year after year he studied the landscapes of Concord.

The result of all this study was the inimitable charm, the intimate mastery, of all of his descriptions of nature, whether an individual leaf or the whole of a vast prospect. That sensuous equipment that served him as an observer of natural fact, served him equally as an observer of natural beauty, giving him a high degree of truth in both spheres. What other writer of our time has perceived so subtly and expressed his vision with so delicate a truth? Ruskin, beside Thoreau, seems theatrical, melodramatic, entranced by his own powers, giving nature the stamp of his expansive personality: Thoreau's self-restraint steadies his insight, lets him penetrate closer to the heart of nature as to his own heart. His magical truth has won him many a devoted reader who finds himself indifferent to, or exasperated by, Thoreau's personal piquancy and his paradoxical satire of human society. Who that knows *Walden* can forget those glorious white pines of "Baker Farm"?—

"Sometimes I ramble to pine groves, standing like temples, or like fleets at sea, full-rigged, with wavy boughs, and rippling with light, so soft and green and shady that the Druids would have forsaken their oaks to worship in them."

One sentence could scarcely do more. Or take his reproduction of the song of the red-winged blackbird, whose liquid notes fill the meadows in early spring:—

"The strain of the red-wing on the willow spray over the water to-night is liquid, bubbling, watery, almost like a tinkling fountain, in perfect harmony with the meadow. It

oozes, trickles, tinkles, bubbles from its throat,—*bob-y-lee-e-e*, and then its shrill, fine whistle.”

Or take his exquisite insight into the beauty of the leaves of the tree known as the scarlet oak:—

“Stand under this tree and see how finely its leaves are cut against the sky,—as it were, only a few sharp points extending from a midrib. They look like double, treble, or quadruple crosses. They are far more ethereal than the less deeply scalloped oak leaves. They have so little leafy *terra firma* that they appear melting away in the light, and scarcely obstruct our view. . . . Lifted higher and higher, and sublimated more and more, putting off some earthiness and cultivating more intimacy with the light each year, they have at length the least possible amount of earthy matter, and the greatest spread and grasp of skyey influences. There they dance, arm in arm with the light,—tripping it on fantastic points, fit partners in those aerial halls. So intimately mingled with it are they, that, what with their slenderness and their glossy surfaces, you can hardly tell at last what in the dance is leaf and what is light. And when no zephyr stirs, they are at most but a rich tracery to the forest windows.”

Or, once more, the beauty of Concord apples:—

“ . . . unspeakably fair,—apples not of Discord, but of Concord! . . . Painted by the frosts, some a uniform clear bright yellow, or red, or crimson, as if their spheres had regularly revolved, and enjoyed the influence of the sun on all sides alike,—some with the faintest pink blush imaginable,—some brindled with deep red streaks like a cow, or with hundreds of fine blood-red rays running regularly from the stem-dimple to the blossom end, like meridional lines, on a straw-colored ground,—some touched with a greenish rust, like a fine lichen, here and there, with crimson blotches or eyes more or less confluent and fiery when wet,—and others gnarly, and freckled or peppered all over on the stem side with fine crimson spots on a white ground, as if accidentally sprinkled from the brush of Him who paints the autumn leaves. Others, again, are sometimes red inside, perfused with a beautiful blush, fairy food, too beautiful to eat,—apple of the Hesperides, apple of the evening sky!”

NORMAN FOERSTER.

Oxford, England.